

Proposed Bill No. 113 Testimony submitted by:

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Handicap Accessibility at the Waterbury Station of the Naugatuck Rail Line

My name is Carmen Romeo and I represent Fascia's Chocolates, founded by my mother and father in-laws in Waterbury in 1964 where our 3rd generation is now helping handcraft our confections. I am the President of Fascia's and also serve as the Treasurer of the Western CT Tourism District in conjunction with the Office of Tourism.

I would like to thank the entire Waterbury delegation for introducing this bill authorizing bonding for the installation of a handicap accessible platform at the Waterbury Station of the Naugatuck Railroad. The Naugatuck Railroad operates 19 miles of track from the northern end of Waterbury to the center of Torrington out of their station in Thomaston. The Railroad Museum of New England is the nonprofit entity that oversees the entire operation which has been a tourist attraction for decades.

At the Thomaston Station, persons with physical handicaps are able to be loaded onto the train via a rolling cart that can lift a wheelchair up to the train level. Up until 2015, there was no issue because there were no regular stops along the tracks in either direction for passengers to disembark. In 2015, Fascia's Chocolates and the Railroad created a platform at Fascia's where our properties meet and began running excursions where people could now have a destination on their scenic tours. We are proud to have been awarded the Governor's Tourism Partners of the Year in 2016 and our programming has only increased from that time.

Coming out of COVID in 2021, the Railroad experienced one of its best years ever with ridership, in part due to the fact that they began offering stops on virtually every train they ran. Naugatuck Railroad personnel estimate that 70-80% of the trains have at least one passenger who has used the lift to board the train. Unfortunately, those passengers cannot disembark at the Waterbury station since they must climb down the train stairs and up a short hill up to the paved area. This same topography does allow relatively easy construction of a platform that is at the same height as the train deck, similar to most commuter rail stations or subway platforms.

We experience the frustration of handicap passengers who board the train but cannot get off. The Railroad also routinely receives calls asking about handicap accessibility and the information is conveyed on their website. We don't know how many parties do not book excursions on the railroad due to the inability to get off the train at the destinations. From a Tourism perspective, adding and promoting this capability can be a major draw to a very unique experience.

On behalf of the Railroad Museum of New England and its Naugatuck Railroad operating company, I would like to thank the Committee for its attention to this proposed bill.